Dangers of exhaustion should be part of safe sleep conversation

Chronic exhaustion affects function, driving habits and shaken-baby risks

When people think about infant sleep safety, the immediate thoughts that come to mind are the dangers of suffocation while co-sleeping, horrifying stories of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), or the importance of a baby being put down on his or her back to sleep. While these are all pressing and important issues, I believe there is one sleep safety issue that often lives in the shadows in the wake of baby’s birth: the dangers of being an exhausted parent.

Eavesdrop on any conversation among parents of babies or young children and inevitably the topic of sleep—or lack thereof—will come up. Despite the fact sleep deprivation is outlawed as a form of torture by the Geneva Convention, for new parents it is prevalent to the point of being cliché; we expect parents of young children to be exhausted, and so we think nothing of it.

In my work as an infant and child sleep consultant, most of the parents I work with are in a state of barely surviving. Often, the images of idyllic parenthood and a sweetly cooing baby have been replaced by feelings of desperation, frustration, and even resentment. Of course, few parents admit to such feelings until the situation becomes dire, or dangerous.

Mothers, especially, can be acutely affected by exhaustion, as they also cope with the hormonal fluctuations and emotional ups and downs following the birth of a baby. Women experiencing sleep deprivation are more likely by large percentages to experience a post-partum mood or mental illness like depression, anxiety, bi-polar events, and attachment disorders. As the stigma surrounding such health crises changes, more and more information is being revealed about the role of sleep in the mental health of new moms.

Additional safety factors also come into play when parents are exhausted. Driving while sleep deprived has been shown to be comparable to driving while intoxicated, as reaction time and focus are both significantly delayed. Most cases of Shaken-Baby occur after a period of sleep deprivation for both parents and infants, specifically during the
late afternoons and in the middle of the night when nerves can feel at their most raw. Nutrition and healthy activity are often neglected in the survival state perpetuated by lack of sleep, as well as other chronic and serious health conditions like a weakened immune system, difficulty coping with change and challenge, and delayed or compromised motor and mental milestones.

Sleep is absolutely a touchy subject for parents as it directly relates to one’s parent philosophy; you need only to post a question about sleep in any parenting forum to see myriad opinions about sleep. One frequent claim is that helping a baby learn to sleep puts them under too much stress, that too much cortisol is released into a baby’s nervous system during any kind of sleep training. Recently, however, studies have shown that the amount of cortisol in the body of a chronically overtired baby and in that of a sleep deprived parent is far greater for a far longer period.

As a child and infant sleep consultant, my job is to find a way to help parents guide their babies towards restorative sleep in a way that works for the family. The end goal is always that everyone in the family get better sleep because it’s not just about the baby; the entire family needs to thrive.

There are many ways to keep a baby safe while he or she is sleeping; new moms and dads are provided information about the great importance of safe sleep before they leave the hospital. I would implore new parents, nurses, doctors, sleep experts and communities to take the next step and consider the impact that chronic sleep deprivation can have of parents of young children, and by default, the children themselves.

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